



**Bayt al-Aqqad – A House in Damascus**

**The David Collection, Copenhagen, until August 7, 2011**

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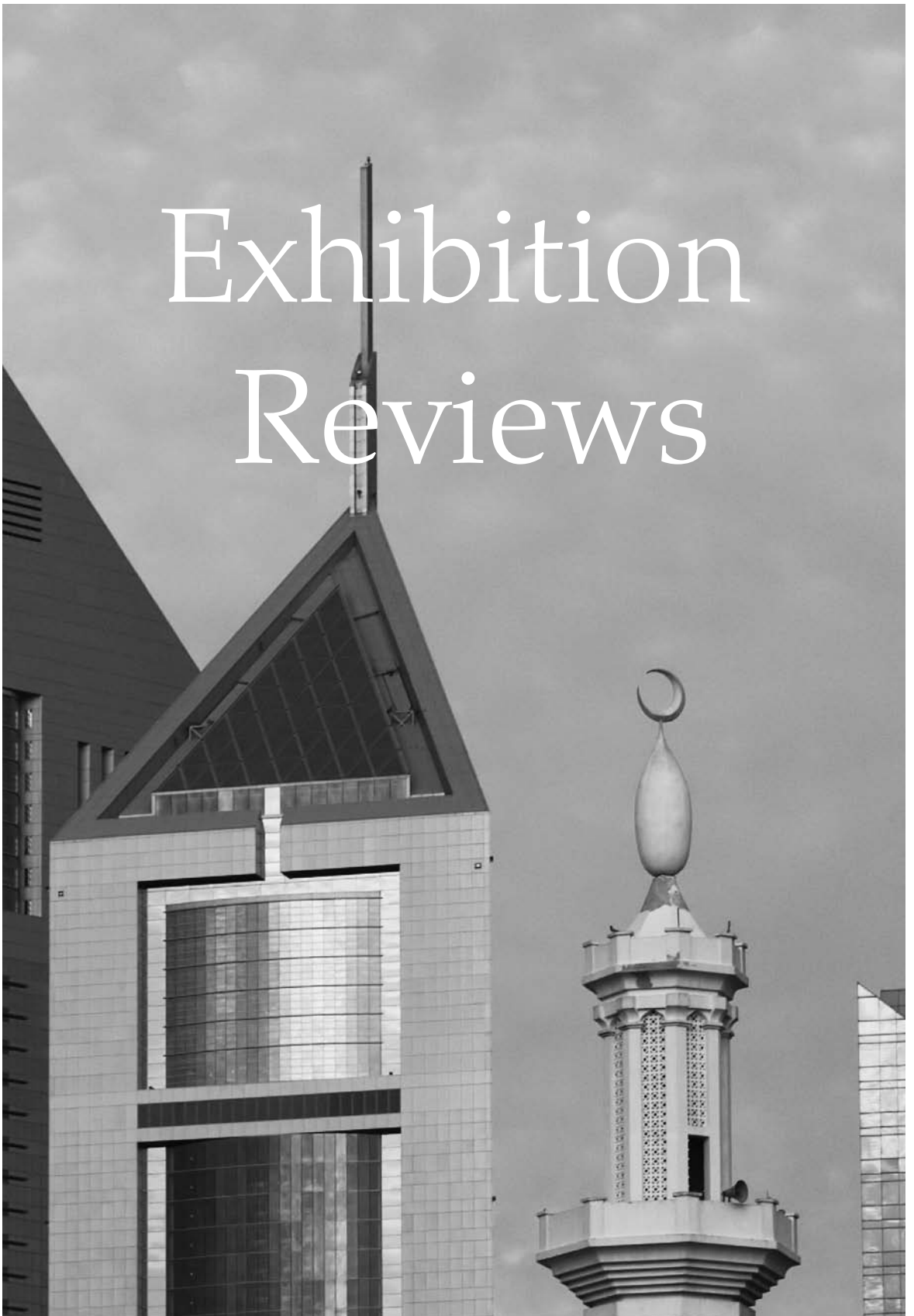
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# Exhibition Reviews



## **EXHIBITION REVIEWS**

IJIA publishes reviews of exhibitions that treat or are relevant to Islamic architecture, design, planning, and urbanism. We seek to provide focus on contemporary production and issues, while also locating these areas of study in communication with other academic disciplines and the contemporary practice of architecture.

### **‘BAYT AL-AQQAD – A HOUSE IN DAMASCUS’, THE DAVID COLLECTION, COPENHAGEN, UNTIL AUGUST 7, 2011**

*Reviewed by Kristoffer Damgaard, University of Copenhagen*

In an exquisitely restored house in Old Damascus is the Danish Institute; a self-governing institution, whose purpose is to encourage research, education, art and culture in and on the Middle East. In 1997, an agreement was signed between Denmark and Syria for the Danish Ministry of Culture to take over a dilapidated house in the old town. The intention was to first restore it to its former glory and subsequently set up a cultural institution that could form a physical and social framework for academics, artists and writers working on or in the region. In October 2000, the Danish Institute in Damascus became a reality, and it has since constituted a venue for promoting and strengthening the cooperative bonds between Denmark and the Arab world. However, this is not the story of the institute itself, but rather a review of an exhibition on the institute – or to be more precise, on the building in which it is housed – that was on display at the David Collection in Copenhagen.

Initially, it should be noted that Bayt al-Aqqad constitutes a remarkable architectural and historical narrative, and one well worth telling. Bayt al-Aqqad’s history begins in the fifteenth century, when the city was rebuilt following the Mongol devastation, while the building’s archaeological heritage stretches as far back as Roman times (incorporating, among other things, the remains of a Herodian theatre in its foundations). The C.L. David Foundation and Collection constituted a major sponsor in the remarkable restoration of this building, which was accomplished through a cooperative effort between skilled Syrian craftsmen and curators, and conservators and architects from the National Museum of Denmark. It is thus appropriate that the results of these efforts be disseminated to the public at this particular venue. The exhibit was organized by Anne Schnettler, an independent architect, and Professor Peder Mortensen, who was a major driving force in acquiring and restoring the house, and who functioned as the institute’s director for the first five years (1996–2001). The passion which both the organizers and the David Collection feel for this building is evident throughout, even though the exhibit is neither overdone nor exuberant.



The David Collection, Copenhagen.

*Figure 1: The inner courtyard, Bayt al-Aqqad, Damascus.*

Via a series of display panels, one is first taken through various morphological stages in the life of the building; starting with its Roman foundations and leading, via its fifteenth-century construction and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century renovations, to the poor state of the building in the late twentieth century. Each panel uses a combination of concise text accompanied by images of specific architectural components dating to the period in question. Having gone through the building's morphological history, the visitor is then led past displays on the restoration process and some of the more spectacularly restored rooms. Neither textual nor photographic materials are

overwhelming, but in unison offer valuable insights into the visual programme of this splendid Damascene town house. The displays guide the visitor through the one room allocated to the exhibit and build up a gradual understanding of the complexity and importance of this building and its history. They culminate in a door leading into a dimly lit room.

The dark room constitutes an audio-visual addition to the display panels, the likes of which are used in many museums. Yet this one has an edge to it. As is generally the case in the David Collection, the materials and lighting applied in the exhibit are excellent. An innovation is the polygonal shape of the walls onto which the imagery is projected, forming an angular view-screen that surrounds the viewer. This not only allows a vista perspective to be applied, but facilitates the movement of images across the canvas. The exhibition calls the audio-visual presentation a 'visual poem', an appropriate title, as it is more a sensory journey than a cognitive one. One begins in the bustling streets of Suq Midhat Pasha and Suq al-Suf, gradually approaching the unobtrusive gate of Bayt al-Aqqad. As the photographs pass beyond the house's entrance, the sounds of the street change to slow footsteps accompanying imagery of the features one passes before entering the splendid central court and its elevated *iwan*. Once the transition from street to interior has been completed, a series of detail-shots expand slowly into more general views of the house. Again the multifaceted screen works well, allowing individual picture panels to drift across the viewing field, but also making room for visual juxtapositions and the more encompassing vistas.

The exhibition reveals a deeply felt appreciation of this building and a refined understanding of the details to be found in its composition. However, just as the 'visual poem' lacks any form of narration, the exhibit would have also benefited from more contextualizing information, rather than mere chronology and room descriptions. I imagine that visitors fascinated by the beauty of Bayt al-Aqqad, but unfamiliar with the Danish Institute, will leave the exhibit wanting more information on both the processes of research and restoration, as well as on the role of the institute in contemporary Syrian society. Similarly, the exhibit provides a fascinating insight into the history and cultural heritage of an old Damascene house, but fails to integrate it within the Damascus cityscape. This is particularly crucial from a scholarly perspective, as the restoration process entailed detailed studies by a range of professionals.

That being said, the inquisitive visitor has ample opportunity to delve deeper. In 2005, the Danish Institute in Damascus published a large volume on the house, its history and archaeology, and the extensive process of restoration. This volume, under the title *Bayt al-'Aqqad – The History and Restoration of a House in Old Damascus*, was edited by former director Mortensen and is a decisive contribution to the study of Islamic architecture. Rarely have single domestic units within a historic cityscape been subjected to such rigorous and extensive study and publication. This important work was preceded by a more colloquial volume entitled *A House in Damascus* (Aristo, 2003) written by literary critic Bjørn Bredal, architect Bente Lange and photographer Jens Lindhe.

The exhibit on Bayt al-Aqqad was well worth a visit for someone familiar with the building and its history, but also for the uninitiated. The quality of the displays, the accompanying texts and the visual material are all high. In general, it might be said that even in the odd case where the exhibit does not strike a visitor as inspirational, it is an excellent excuse to visit the rest of the David Collection, which to those interested in the arts of Islam, is indeed one of the finest in the world.

## Contributor Details

Kristoffer Damgaard is a postdoctoral researcher specializing in the field of Islamic archaeology and based at the Materiality in Islam Research Initiative under the University of Copenhagen.

## **'OUT OF PLACE', DARAT AL-FUNUN – THE KHALID SHOMAN FOUNDATION, AMMAN, JUNE 7–SEPTEMBER 29, 2011**

*Reviewed by Yasir Sakr, Jordan University of Science and Technology*

The exhibition 'Out of Place' is a collaboration between Tate Modern in London and Darat al-Funun in Amman. The exhibition features works of four international artists which, according to its curators, Kasia Redzisz and Ala' Younis, explore 'the relationship between dominant political forces and personal and collective histories by looking at urban space, architectural structures and the condition of displacement'. In exploring these issues, the displays of the four artists raise intriguing comments on today's definition of art and its political role.

The Romanian artist Ion Grigorescu recorded, through an 8mm camera, intriguing patterns of 'ephemeral' everyday events taking place in the urban spaces of modern Bucharest since the 1970s. His film showed the un-programmed and often chaotic way people used those spaces, which were at odds with the planning targets of the Communist authorities of the Nicolae Ceaușescu regime. Scenes filmed include broken vehicles and uncovered trenches indefinitely lining the city's main boulevards. To the artist, these anomalous mundane scenes represent a paradoxical reality of both 'defiance' and 'adherence' of the public to the official disciplinary practices of the regime of Ceaușescu and the subsequent period of liberalization. This perhaps explains the blurred imagery of Grigorescu's film, which gave it a bit of a surreal character, though at the risk of appearing illegible and protracted.

Grigorescu's film is to be compared to the collection of photos on display by the Palestinian artist Ahlam Shibli. One of her representative sets is entitled *Goter 26*, which is an idiom the Palestinian Bedouins appropriated from 'Go there', a command commonly uttered in the past by British mandate authorities. Its subject is the current precarious reality of Arab Bedouins who were forcibly relocated in new settlements away from their original habitat in the Negev desert by Israeli authorities. The images focus on empty spaces to demonstrate the Bedouins' alienation and agonizing adaptation to the new housing which is discrepant to their original homes. Shibli's images show, too, the 'illegal' makeshift structures of the other Bedouins who refused the Israeli relocation plans and rejected the new housing.

In parallel to Grigorescu's film of the temporal patterns of use of Bucharest's public spaces, Shibli's photos of the ephemeral structures of displaced Bedouins appear as ambivalent symbols of both defiance and resignation to the status quo. Compared to the effects of Grigorescu's blurred colour film, monochromatic filters emphasized the melancholic feel of Shibli's pictures.

The general theme of 'out of place', embodied in the discontinuity and tension between the memory of the idealized past and the vulgar encroachment



of the actual present, is perhaps more legible in the photo-display by Hrair Sarkissian. Sarkissian is an Armenian artist who as a child lived in Damascus, but upon his recent visit to his original homeland Armenia was shocked to discover the discrepancy between the alien present dominated by Soviet interventions and the idealized past transmitted to him by his ancestors in exile. Entitled *In Between* (2007), his photos feature meticulous compositions contrasting the huge dilapidated concrete buildings of the Soviet era with the natural hilly landscape of their siting. Yet Sarkissian's crisp and aesthetic compositions do not appear to be a mere condemnation of the encroachments of the Soviet period. The way he framed the photographed objects and used dark tones generates a paradoxical experience of these Soviet structures both as magnificent ruins and as desecration of the surrounding ancestral natural landscape.

*Shading Monument for the Artist* (2009) by the Turkish artist Cevdet Erkek, the fourth participant in the exhibition, presents an intriguing parallel to the displays of the other three artists, but also questions its affinity with them, both in its physical nature and mode of representing the subject matter. It is not a pictorial composition featuring architectural or urban objects; rather Erkek's work is a collage of words quoted from memorials to the International Brigades of volunteers who fought in the Spanish Civil War. The words are engraved and assembled in a sculpture that casts shadows of changing phrase combinations on the gallery walls, which vary throughout the day according to light intensity. To figure out the sentences projected, the viewer needs to bend and move around the display, examining the inverted engraved words from the bottom and rear.

As such Erkek's sculpture does much more than document the ephemeral events that are 'out of place' and comment on their ambivalence. True it deals with the issue of 'displacement' through statements quoted from other memorials. But the sculpture displaces and reconstitutes them to create a new assertive reality, which is autonomous from their supposed referents. Rather than simply displaying images of displacement to the generally 'disinterested' viewer of the museum, the exhibit itself literally displaces the viewer cognitively and bodily and thus sustains his/her curiosity and critical engagement.

In summation, the exhibition 'Out of Place' fulfilled its goals in exploring the interplay of displacement, politics, urban space and history in contemporary societies. Yet it also underscored the dilemma of defining modern art and its place in societies that are recently undergoing dramatic transformations of national self-image, whether as a political instrument for an ideological cause or as a generator of its own politics.

## Contributor Details

Yasir Sakr Ph.D. did his architectural graduate studies at MIT and the University of Pennsylvania. He is a teacher, practising architect and international consultant in architectural design and planning and development management who has won several awards in major design competitions. His latest professional assignment was the management of the development projects regenerating the central zone of the holy city of Mecca. A former visiting scholar at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Sakr currently teaches architectural design and theory at Jordan University of Science and Technology. His forthcoming book, *The Hurva Subversive Utopia: Louis Kahn and the Question of the Jewish National Memory of Jerusalem*, is due to be released by MSI press in 2012.



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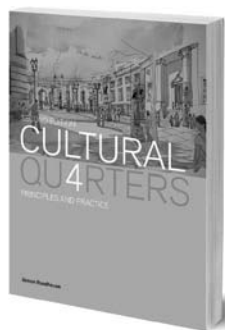
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